National Schools Poetry Award 2025

Judge's Report, by Ruby Solly

In 2012 and 2013, I was lucky enough to be a finalist in the Schools Poetry Award. It was the first time I'd ever even been on a plane, and I often think about how when Katie picked me up from the airport I must have seemed like a real small-town hick. I couldn't believe that people just sat on the plane and read their books, or looked bored. I was glued to the window the entire time looking out at te ika-a-Maui beneath me, with all the stories of my childhood under the korowai aroha of Te Arawa and Tuwharetoa coming to life. I was ecstatic by the time I got off the plane, and remained so for the rest of the trip. I remember Hinemoana Baker, a Kāi Tahu and Takataapui poet, taking our workshop. Which gave me this spark of realisation that my life could grow to be very different from what it had been so far. Poetry to me is a lot like that aeroplane trip. It's being able to look from a different angle, to see from above how an entire story will play out. But as a reader, it's being able to understand that what you are experiencing is incredible, it's being able to keep looking out the window and appreciating each detail, even when you don't know the landscape. Needless to say, returning to the Schools Poetry Award as a judge felt like an important full circle moment for me, and I tried my very best to keep my eyes on the landscape the entire flight.

Reading 240 poems from rangatahi across Aotearoa, also provided me with an opportunity to reflect on how the world has changed for rangatahi in the past thirteen years and indeed, some things have changed a great deal. These students have come through a global pandemic that continues to shape their lives. They have witnessed global unrest and atrocities that were beyond the comprehension of myself at their age. However, so many things have remained the same between my generation and the generation of poets I have been lucky enough to read. In a way, this can provide both comfort and despair. To look at all of the entries is to see a cross section of the experiences of young people in Aotearoa at this particular time in history. There are the universal (but this isn't to say that these usual things aren't profound and challenging to navigate): teen heartbreak, identity, those big moments of questioning who we are and what we will be. And then, there are poems that so deeply reflect the current state of our nation. Poems that deal with homelessness and lack of security, erasure of culture and language, violence, and mental illness,

with no help in sight. To those who wrote about these experiences, thank you for your honesty and your words. I wish we could put them directly in the hands of our current leadership, and I encourage you all to continue to use your words to help us understand your world.

Our winning poem for 2025 is ‘GUILT TANK’ by Keiko Bruce, a Year 13 student from One Tree Hill College. This prose poem feels like an entire film captured in a single carefully laid out paragraph of poetry. There’s something of a psychological thriller effect to it with its parallels between physical events and family relationships, all held within intergenerational traumas and understandings. I think this poem says so much about our rhetoric in New Zealand and how we often speak without speaking, there is something dark and alive within this work. It’s a poem that will stay with you for months after reading it. Your senses still alert to wet goldfish both in and out of the tank.

I must say it was extremely challenging to choose a winner, and I truly loved all of the top ten (and so many of the 240!). To look at the themes, the poems around identity, particularly around identity as it moves through generations, were particularly striking to me. Māori, Pākehā, and Tauiwi exploring and reflecting on what it means to be who you are in this place has come a long way within New Zealand poetry in the last thirteen years, and this deeper thinking and engagement is alive and well within our rangatahi poets. ‘Someday I’ll’ by Jasmine Liu (Year 13, Rangitoto College), shows us moments and objects between a grandparent and grandchild who in some ways have been raised by different places, but share the same whakapapa. The depth of love in this poem is matched equally by the hesitation around knowing how to express it to our kaumātua who, in communities like this, have given so much for the lives of their mokopuna. This poem is a gift in itself, both to those kaumātua and to their descendants who navigate their own versions of this poignant relationship. ‘Illicium Verum’ by Penny Dai (Year 13, St Andrew’s College) is another fantastic poem that takes us on a sensory adventure through whakapapa. We can smell the star anise, we can taste it, and it shows us so many different ways that our elders tell us they love us, without saying those exact words. ‘Energy’ by Cameron Lewes Murray (Year 13, Wellington College) is a striking meditation on New Zealand bach culture and changing feelings of Pākehā within ideas of relating to and owning land, as well as gentrification and wealth. There’s a strong sense of identity in this piece, in a way that doesn’t invoke a sense of shame or pride, but rather acceptance and flexibility. It has a quiet knowing to it, alongside an aesthetic that in itself helps to affirm a New Zealand identity that is constantly changing and growing with us. ‘Nga Ingoa I Te Rangi - The Names In The Sky’ by Maia Hills (Year 13, Wellington High School) is an eloquent and passionate kōrero that represents so many Māori across the generations. The sense of anger partnered with strength in this poem is perfectly balanced alongside the reo that has been used. Kupu Māori are placed, taonga-like, amongst English rerenga, showing how precious our reo is, and providing the reader with seeds of hope amidst the

strength and challenges of the author. ‘My ribs echo haka I never screamed’ is a sentence that will live on in me each time I haka, especially in the moments I don’t feel as strong as I would like, kā mihi e Maia, this is such a gift to others like us.

World issues and the weight they have was another strong theme, with anxiety surrounding these issues, but also, immense amounts of compassion and understanding of the global responsibility to seek change. ‘Doing My Self-Care App While Earth Implodes’ by Alexandria Farrington (Year 12, St Mary’s College, Wellington) is a sort of curated and interlinked stream of consciousness that juxtaposes personal struggles with global struggles, in a way that is both universally understandable and intimately personal to the author. The humour mixed with sadness in this piece creates a tone that feels both ironic and deeply serious. A piece that truly serves as a reflection of these times, if not a future historical artefact. ‘Whispering to the braves’ by Mohammad Nazif Islam (Year 12, Timaru Boys’ High School) is a beautifully crafted rhyming work on the tragedies in Gaza and Palestine, and the lack of response from the wider world, and the lack of justice for Palestinians. This poem provides a strong personal commentary on this tragedy, with powerful imagery and language. The care taken with these words is equally matched to the rage and despair, creating a poem that serves as a call to action for help for Gaza and Palestine. A powerful piece. ‘Change’ by Thomas Rowe Palmer (Year 12, St Andrews’ College) is the shortest of all the poems, but perhaps has the greatest impact per word ratio of any poem I’ve ever read. A perfect description of how it feels to exist as a young person at this point in the historical crossroads. A metaphoric masterpiece that could reflect change as big as global warming or conflict, or as personal as finishing school or moving cities. That’s for the reader to decide.

‘A life spent looking up’ by Aidan Clarke (Year 13, Westlake Boys’ High School) weaves together three whakatauki with musings on the current state of the world, with an emphasis on the social landscape faced by young people. It has a fantastic opening line, ‘I like to imagine a Neandertal Einstein’, as well as humorous nods to internet slang like ‘sapiens sapiens wya?’. It’s wonderful to read rangatahi figuring out their world in real time, and doing so with such a beautiful juxtaposition of humour and depth. Another poem rich in language is ‘The Eternal Jellyfish’ by Isla Partridge (Year 12, Te Aho O Te Kura Pounamu). I love poems that manage to fit an entire world of complexities, science, and senses, into a simple moment. The juxtaposition between animal life and the synthetic elements we as humans introduce to control it sits metaphorically next to blue energy drink and how it resembles the ocean. The innocent questions of a child sit alongside actions of adults that make choices on behalf of nature. This poem makes the grotesque fascinating, and makes us wonder about the true nature of the world around us.

I’m extremely proud of all our entrants, with special acknowledgment to our top ten. I don’t know what you would have thought of me and my poems as a seventeen year

old, but I do think that so many of our passions and problems have not changed. I see myself at your age within many of those 240 poems. Sometimes it may feel that a poem might not change anything, but being able to tell people how you feel, to show them how the world looks from behind your eyes, is a powerful way to express yourself and honour the journeys of others like you, and those who are not in positions to express themselves safely.

Again to those entrants not on this list, please do not be discouraged. I have spoken to many poets who entered this competition in high school and did not make it to the final ten who are still writing, are published, performing, and who have poetry as an important part of their lives, whatever that may look like. Imagine what it would feel like to find a poem from one of your tīpuna, speaking of what it was like for them as a young person. Because in the overall sense of it all, that is exactly what you have created. Never underestimate the value of a poem. Whether that is to one person, or one hundred or more. Poetry is powerful. Being able to communicate and share is powerful, and I encourage you to keep harnessing that power for the good of yourselves, your whānau, Aotearoa, and indeed, humankind.

Ruby Solly

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